

Conspicuity: The Art of Being Seen

When I ride my bicycle or motorcycle, it is as if I am invisible—not invincible, but rather unseen by motorists because I am something outside their expected perceptual set of boxy vehicles measuring eight feet or more across. Drivers overlook vehicles smaller than their expectation; after hitting a cyclist, a motorist typically says, “I didn’t see her.” So, recognizing this human tendency to ignore what one doesn’t expect, I wear a reflective safety vest and a light-colored helmet and use extra lights.

Some motorcyclists assert a different solution: “Loud pipes save lives.” I disagree.

Most car and motorcycle accidents involve the car turning in front of the motorcyclist. Since loud pipes thunder backward rather than forward, they do little to alert the turning vehicle to the motorcycle’s presence. In addition, the noise is unfocused and impacts many who aren’t even on the same road as the motorcycle. So, all that noise going out the back is wasted as a conspicuous safety mechanism, although it does serve to annoy many others who—up to that point—posed no threat to the motorcyclist.

As a bicyclist or motorcyclist, I don’t need to indiscriminately announce my presence and annoy everyone. I need only take care that those who pose an immediate threat to me see me; the really important ones are those who might turn or pull out in front of me, cut me off, and so on. Rather than annoy with unnecessary noise, I ride defensively by placing myself outside of drivers’ blind spots. I also watch for the little clues that signal a driver’s intentions (hands at the top of the steering wheel, front wheels turning) or lack of focus (one hand at his or her ear). I pay attention to whether the sun might momentarily blind them or whether

another vehicle might hide me from the car that plans to turn in front of me. Depending on what I observe, I take one of many appropriate actions in order to remain unscathed.

Applying these principles to law librarianship means we should first attend to those who make decisions that impact us. Depending on our institution and where we are in the hierarchy, that key decision maker could be a dean, chief operating officer, executive director, or another librarian. We must learn what these decision makers most deeply care about, and we learn that by listening to them and reading what they read.

Knowing what keeps them awake at night, we can provide information solutions that make their jobs easier while demonstrating the value we provide to them and the institution. Paying attention to the little details of how they speak and write enables us to customize our communications so they hear and see us—without becoming annoyed.

Communicating effectively increases our job security just as conspicuity increases the safety of cyclists. “Keep the rubber side down, shiny side up.”

With this issue, *Spectrum* continues the reviews of selected programs at the Annual Meeting (beginning on page 17). In addition, Jenny Zook writes on the furloughed librarian experience (page 40); and Linda Will, with Michael Orrick, revisits her June 2008 article with a second look at the relationship between librarians and vendors (page 42).



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